

Nominee draws ire of gay rights groups

Cardiologist's view that homosexuality is an unhealthy lifestyle makes him unfit, they say

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LEXINGTON, Ky. (AP) — Dr. James Holsinger's 41-page résumé describes a man who seems born to be surgeon general, with impressive qualifications in medicine, academics, government and military service.

People who have worked with him say he took tough stands as Kentucky's health secretary, advocating expanded stem cell research despite conservative opposition and supporting higher cigarette taxes in a big tobacco-producing state. Gov. Ernie Fletcher commanded him for working to fight obesity and other health problems in Kentucky, which ranks near the bottom in many categories.

"He helped get the ball rolling and focusing on healthy lifestyles," Fletcher said.

It's what the cardiologist considers to be an unhealthy lifestyle that has some critics determined to derail the U.S. surgeon general nominee's confirmation in the Senate.

Sixteen years ago, he wrote a paper for the United Methodist Church in which he likened the reproductive organs to male and female "pipe fittings" and argued that homosexuality is therefore biologically unnatural.

"When the complementarity of the sexes is breached, injuries and diseases may occur," Holsinger wrote, citing studies showing higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases among gay men and the risk of injury from anal sex.

As president of the church's national Judicial Council, Holsinger voted last year to support a pastor who blocked a gay man from joining a congregation. In 2004, he voted to expel a lesbian from the clergy.

"He has a pretty clear bias against gays and lesbians," said Christina Gilgor, director of the Kentucky Fairness Alliance, a gay rights group. "This ideology flies in the face of current scientific medical studies. That makes me uneasy that he rejects science

and promotes ideology."

Gay rights activists say they're concerned that if Holsinger becomes America's top doctor, he won't treat all of America equally. His supporters, including fellow doctors, faculty members and state officials, said he would never let his theological views affect his medical ones.

"Jim is able, as most of us are in medicine, to separate feelings that we have from our responsibility in taking care of patients," said Douglas Scutchfield, a professor of public health at the University of Kentucky.

Holsinger, 68, has declined all interview requests.

Blair Jones, a White House spokesman, said in a telephone interview Wednesday night that Holsinger had spent his career in public service and taking care of others.

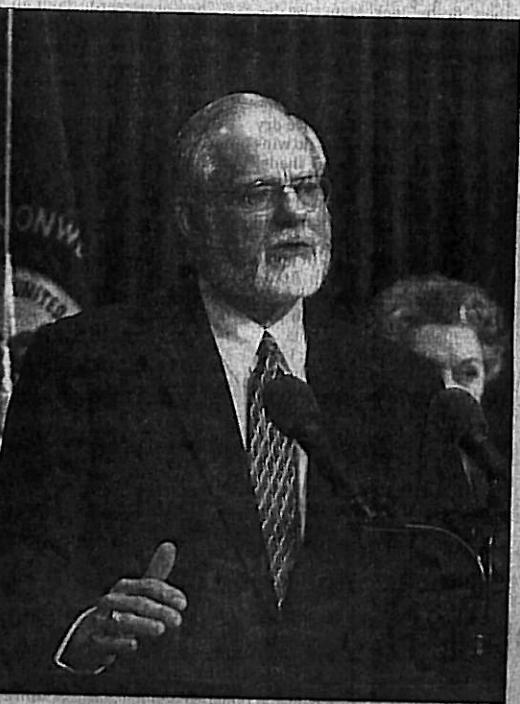
"On numerous occasions, Dr. Holsinger has taken up the banner for underrepresented populations, and he will continue to be a strong advocate for these groups and all Americans," Jones said.

Holly Babin, spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, said Holsinger's writings reflected scientific data from the 1980s.

"It should be noted that in 1991, homosexuals were banned from the military and several years before that, homosexuality and Haitian nationality were considered risk factors for HIV/AIDS," Babin said in a statement. "Over the last 20 years, a clearer understanding of these issues has been achieved. Any new compilation of scientific information on health issues facing homosexual populations would have a substantially different focus."

Holsinger served as Kentucky's health secretary and chancellor of the University of Kentucky's medical center. He taught at several medical schools and spent more than three decades in the Army Reserve, retiring in 1993 as a major general.

In announcing Holsinger as his choice for America's top doc-



AP PHOTO/PATTI LONGMIRE

Dr. James Holsinger talked during a news conference after accepting the head position to the Cabinet of Health Services Dec. 5, 2003 in Frankfort. He is now President Bush's nominee for surgeon general and has come under fire from gay rights groups.

tor May 24, Bush said the physician will focus on educating the public about childhood obesity.

The previous surgeon general was Dr. Richard Carmona, whose term was allowed to expire last summer. Carmona issued an unprecedented report condemning secondhand smoke.

Holsinger received his bachelor's degree from the University of Kentucky, master's degrees from the University of South Carolina and Asbury Theological Seminary and a doctorate and medical degree from Duke University.

He wrote the 1991 church paper on homosexuality at a time when the United Methodist Church was

one of numerous denominations considering a more open stance on allowing practicing homosexuals to join. It took that step in 1992, saying gays are of "sacred worth" who should be welcomed. Practicing homosexuals are still prohibited from serving in the clergy.

Holsinger also helped found a Methodist congregation, Hope Springs Community Church, that gay rights activists say believes homosexuality is a matter of choice and can be "cured." The Lexington church helps some gay members to "walk out of that lifestyle," the Rev. David Calhoun told the Lexington Herald-Leader last week.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which is opposing his nomination along with the Human Rights Campaign and other local and national groups, calls such a practice "nothing short of torture" for gays.

Larry Pickens, general secretary of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns for the United Methodist Church, said he was familiar with the ideology of Holsinger's congregation. But he said some congregations do hold the stance that homosexuals can become heterosexual.

"I don't think it's a wide position of the United Methodist Church but it is a position," Pickens said. "There are people who feel it their ministry to help gay and lesbian people who want to move from that lifestyle, who feel it an orientation they've acquired. I think there are also those within the church who do not believe it a realistic option for persons who feel they are predisposed to homosexuality."

Holsinger was a dissenting voice in the 2004 vote regarding a lesbian associate pastor. The majority voted to keep her, citing questions about whether she had openly declared her homosexuality.

Phyllis Nash, who worked under Holsinger for nine years as vice chancellor at the medical center, said the views he took in church appear at odds with his professional actions.

She recalled a women's health conference that Holsinger helped organize in 2002 that included a session on lesbian health. Despite complaints from some lawmakers, Holsinger insisted the session go forward, she said.

"His reaction in support could not have been any stronger," Nash said. "He said, as health care providers, we have to be prepared to meet the health needs of anyone who walks into the door."